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FRENCH FURNITURE.

BY THEODORE CHILD.

STYLE.

I.

IN the foregoing papers on the furniture of a French house, I have endeavored to give some general impression of the arrangement of a French interior as a whole and of the ordinary arrangement of each particular room. I propose now to go back upon my steps and resume those studies at once from a more general and from a more particular point of view, examining alternately abstract questions like the ornamentation of furniture, broad subjects like the application to furniture and decoration of the various industries in which the French excel, such as those of bronze, iron, ceramics, etc.; and particular objects, as for instance candlesticks or fire-irons or what not, always studying the matter in hand from the French point of view, from French documents and examples, and with the purpose of bringing into relief the good points of design, taste, execution, or convenience in which it may be to our interest to imitate, and, if possible, to improve upon the French. Generally I shall only speak of very high class work and of work which is certainly not within the reach of average purses. The reader will not, I hope, find fault with me on that account; for the interests of amateur decorators and of those young ladies who dabble in

tion, to the composition and decoration of furniture more suited to general contemporary use. The high class ordinary French furniture as well as the *meubles de style* and the *meubles de luxe*, in short all furniture that has pretensions to

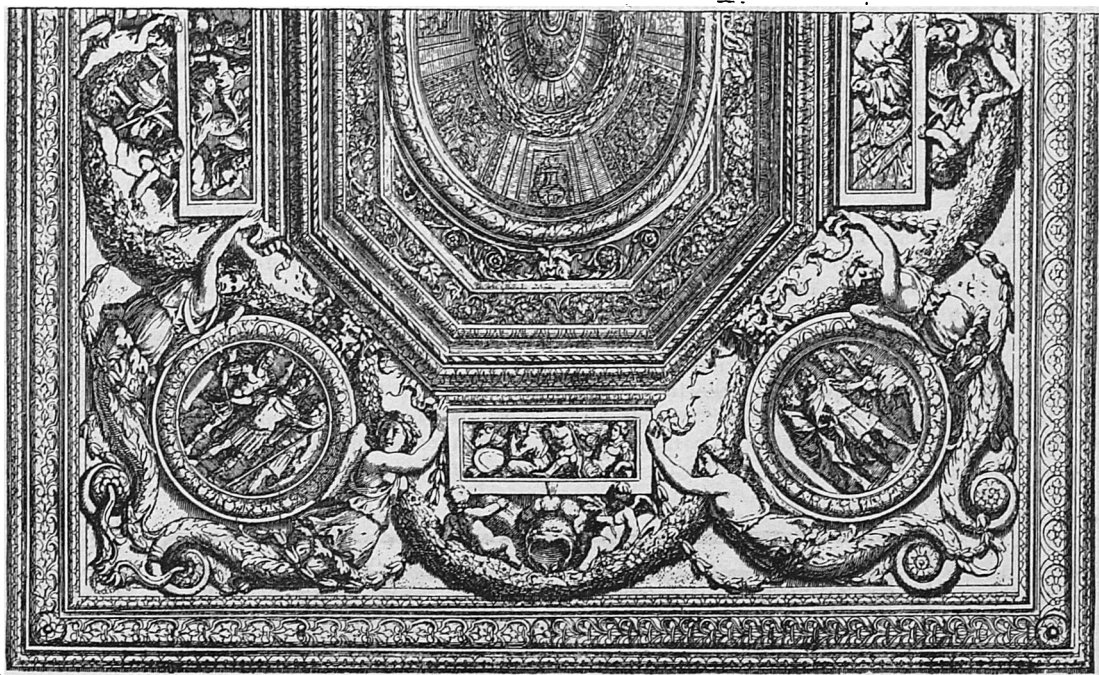
artistic quality is inspired by the fine models of the past four centuries. The processes and the materials employed are virtually the same now as formerly, the modifications being only on the side of greater perfection or of greater economy. In point of fact, modern decorative art in France is a revival, and hitherto no great and dominant artistic personality has arisen whose individuality has been sufficiently pronounced to enable him to direct that revival and to create any absolutely novel decorative or constructive combinations, or, in other words,

material comfort, no small progress we must admit, but still a progress in which art has played a very small rôle. Nevertheless, although we shall generally seek in vain for original modern work in a worthy and characteristic style, we shall not unfrequently have to notice minor and partial modifications and new combinations that have resulted in works of art that can bear comparison with the work of the past. The great and unmistakable advantage that the past centuries had over the present is that formerly great artists did not think it beneath their dignity, or beneath their talent, to devote their attention to decoration and design.

I must confess to a feeling of constant and agreeable surprise at the immense zeal and activity of American designers of furniture and interior decoration, as I find it displayed in each succeeding number of THE DECORATOR AND FURNISHER. In these designs there is a striving after novelty, a desire to produce something that shall be the expression of a generation or of an epoch, an originality in the combination of the elements of ornamentation that are really remarkable. Here, in France, this seeking after novelty is almost entirely wanting, and it is one of the constant regrets of the juries of our exhibitions that the French manufacturers do not devote to work of a more modern character, the serious efforts and talents that they employ in producing fac-similes of old models. Indeed the constantly increasing number of literal copies of old models is an alarming symptom for the future of the furniture industry which, for the past four centuries, has been one of the glories of France. One asks, what is the cause of this impoverishment of the formerly so inventive genius of the French furniture makers? The manufacturers all make the same answer: their customers ask for reproductions of old models, and when they make new models their expenses are greater and they are not sure of selling their goods.

II.

A work of art is always expressive, either objectively or subjectively; it can only enter into communication with us through our senses and by a synthesis of sensible perceptions which it determines in us. The artist, either from incapacity or purposely, may have proposed merely to awaken in us agreeable sensations, but he cannot prevent these sensations having some property in common with our moral status, and consequently, whether he will or not, he affects our souls by some expression. Furthermore, a distinction must be made in works of art according as they take their models more or less directly from nature, or proceed more or less from the imagination of the artist, or in other words we must ob-



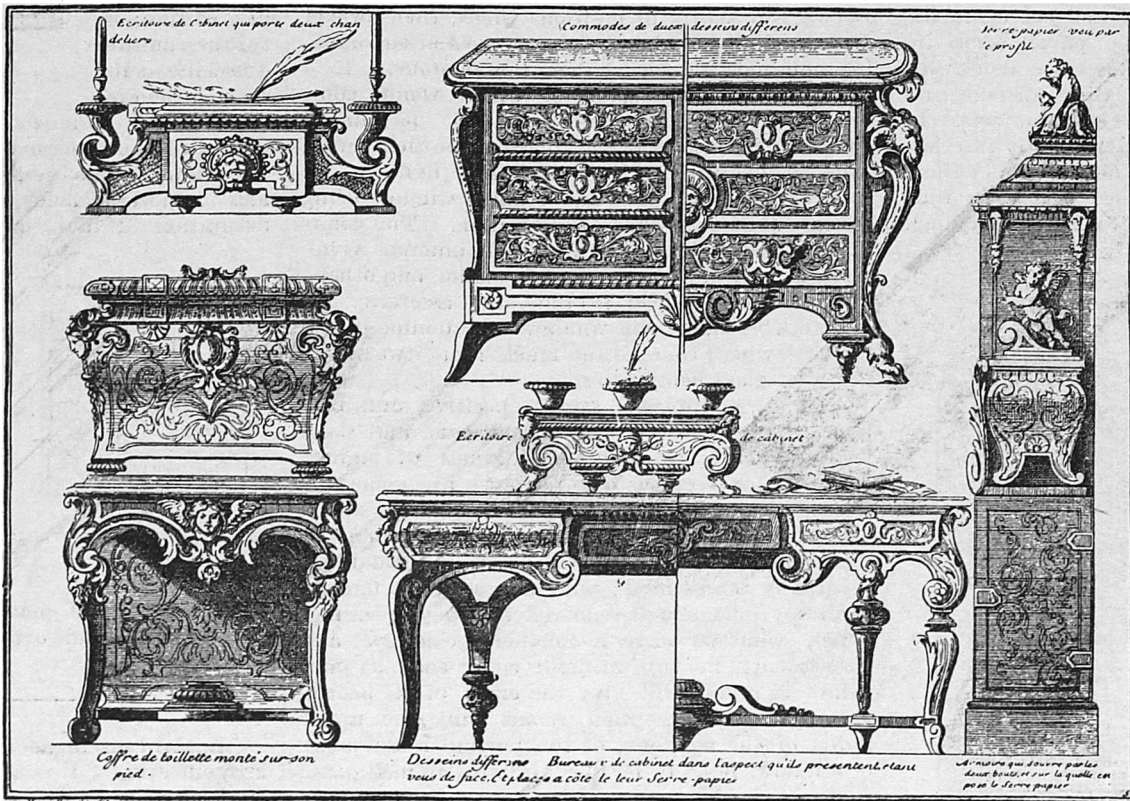
CEILING, STYLE LOUIS XIII.



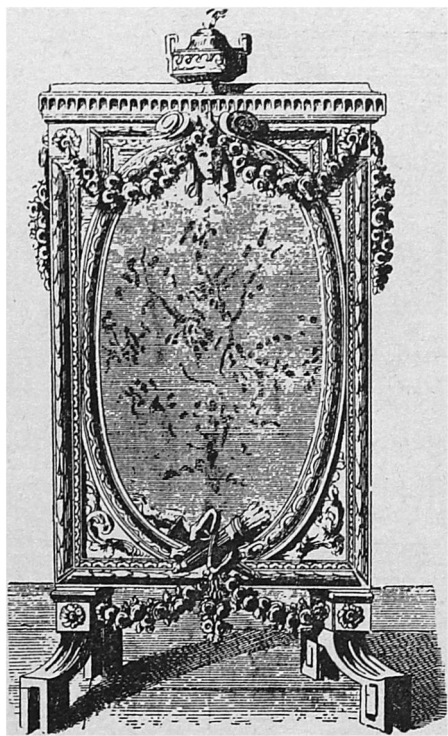
PANEL, STYLE ROCAILLE.

economical domestic art are amply attended to by other and able writers in these columns. The art student, whether in the decorative or in any other of the arts, must keep his eyes fixed on the finest examples of the past and of the present, and endeavor, even in the most modest work that he produces, to be guided by the same principles of purity, excellence, and honesty of execution that have always guided the great masters. In the illustrations that will accompany the text, the reader will often find priceless masterpieces, the glory of European museums or of private collections. If he is irritated by their too great splendor, or discouraged by their immense costliness, let him remember that the great contemporary artists in France, Germany, Austria, Belgium and England, are seeking their inspiration in the study of these works, reproducing them for those whom fortune has favored with wealth, and adapting the principles, followed in their composition and decora-

to create a new style, the style of the nineteenth century. The progress that has been made by the *ébénistes* and *tapissiers* of the present century has been purely in the matter of



FURNITURE, STYLE LOUIS XIV.



SCREEN, STYLE LOUIS XVI.

serve in what proportions they are objective or subjective, beginning with the portrait, for instance, which is very objective, and ending with the symphony, which is very subjective.

Decoration requires on the part of the artist a comprehension of types, for although decoration is subjective it is not so entirely, inasmuch as it borrows from natural flora and fauna many of its elements and *motifs*. The first artist, for instance, who thought of adorning the capital of a column with the leaves of an acanthus, as has been excellently said by M. Sully-Prudhomme in his learned treatise on *L'Expression dans les Beaux-Arts*, had to simplify the figure of that plant and reduce it to its essential lines, or in other words to conceive the esthetic type of the acanthus—the type which by gradual simplification, abstraction, and degradation, becomes finally a more or less cold and conventional figure. So every artist who proposes to seek a *motif* of ornamentation in a natural object, is bound thus to extract the type, to disengage it from accidents and to establish what we might call a definition of its form.

This process calls into play sympathy, for in his search after the agreeable, the artist instinctively obeys a certain sentiment of grace and elegance, which makes him choose in the imperfect model the traits out of which he composes the esthetic type. To pursue at length the analysis of the psychological conditions of the artist would lead us too far; it suffices to have indicated in a very broad way how the personality of the artist becomes imprinted on his work. His work implies fatally his moral reflection, his temperament; and his temperament, according to modern notions, is the whole physical and moral nature of an artist in all its complexity of hereditary, accidental, and inevitable contemporary influences—the personality of the artist, in short, as molded and modified by the *milieu* in which he lives.

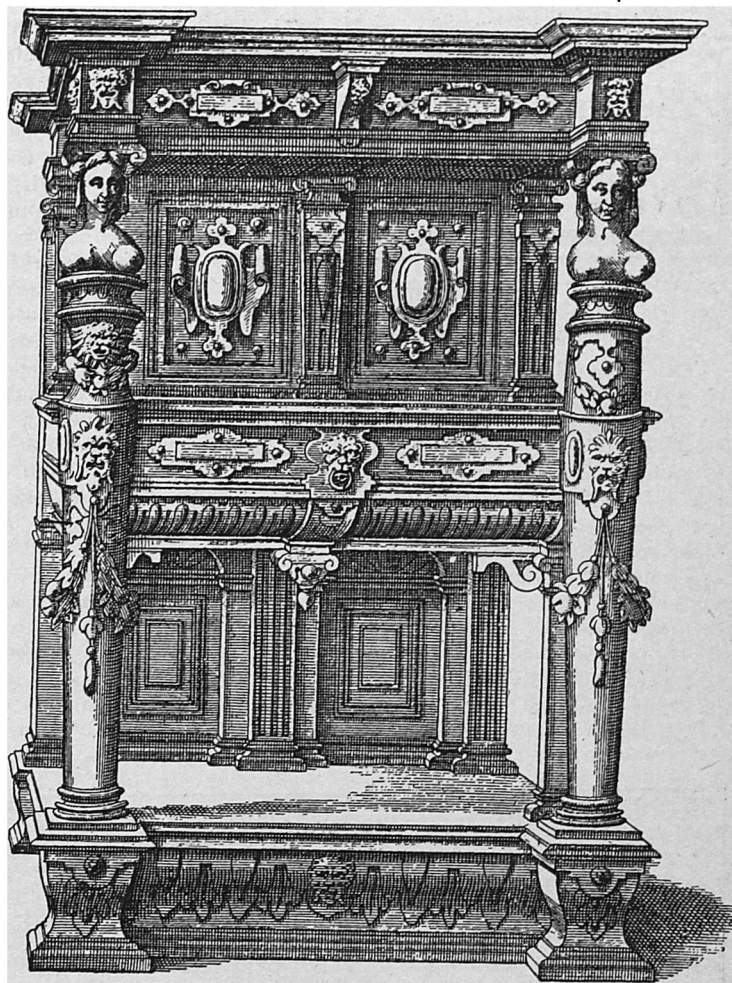
To put the matter shortly: the artist is a person endowed with some peculiarly fine sense, and the excellence of a sense awakens in the person who possesses it the need of procuring for this sense occasions of pleasure. *Temperament* determines choice between sensations and furnishes the artist with what is called his *ideal*, which is simply the abstract term necessary for all comparison in art as in everything else. By the very art of choosing we affirm that we have an ideal, because choosing is simply manifesting, after comparison, that one of two or more things is better suited to our aptitude to enjoy, an aptitude which is diversely styled taste, predisposition or penchant. As his nature develops, an artist selects for himself a quantity of harmonious combinations suited to his aptitude to enjoy, and there finds his stock of *originality*. Then, when his temperament has freed itself and fixed the artist's ideal, he *invents* and *composes* with everincreasing originality until his stock is exhausted. Add to this the aptitude of expressing the harmonious combinations imagined by the brain, and you have the complete

artist. When we speak of the style of this or that artist, we mean simply what we have above called his *ideal*; and when we speak of the style of this or that epoch, we mean the *ideal* of that epoch—an ensemble of preferences resulting from the most complex and multifarious moral and material influences.

When we speak of an ornament or of a piece of furniture as having *style*, we use the word in a different sense, in the same sense in which it is applied to literature, meaning as J. Russell Lowell has said, "that exquisite something which like the grace of perfect breeding, everywhere pervasive and nowhere emphatic, makes itself felt by the skill with which it effaces itself, and masters us at last with a sense of indefinable completeness." Style in this sense is a higher form of imagination, the faculty that shapes, recasts, gives unity of design and balanced gravitation of parts.

III.

In speaking of decorative art in Europe, we have to do with the work of four schools: the French, Italian, German, and that of the Low Countries (Flemish and

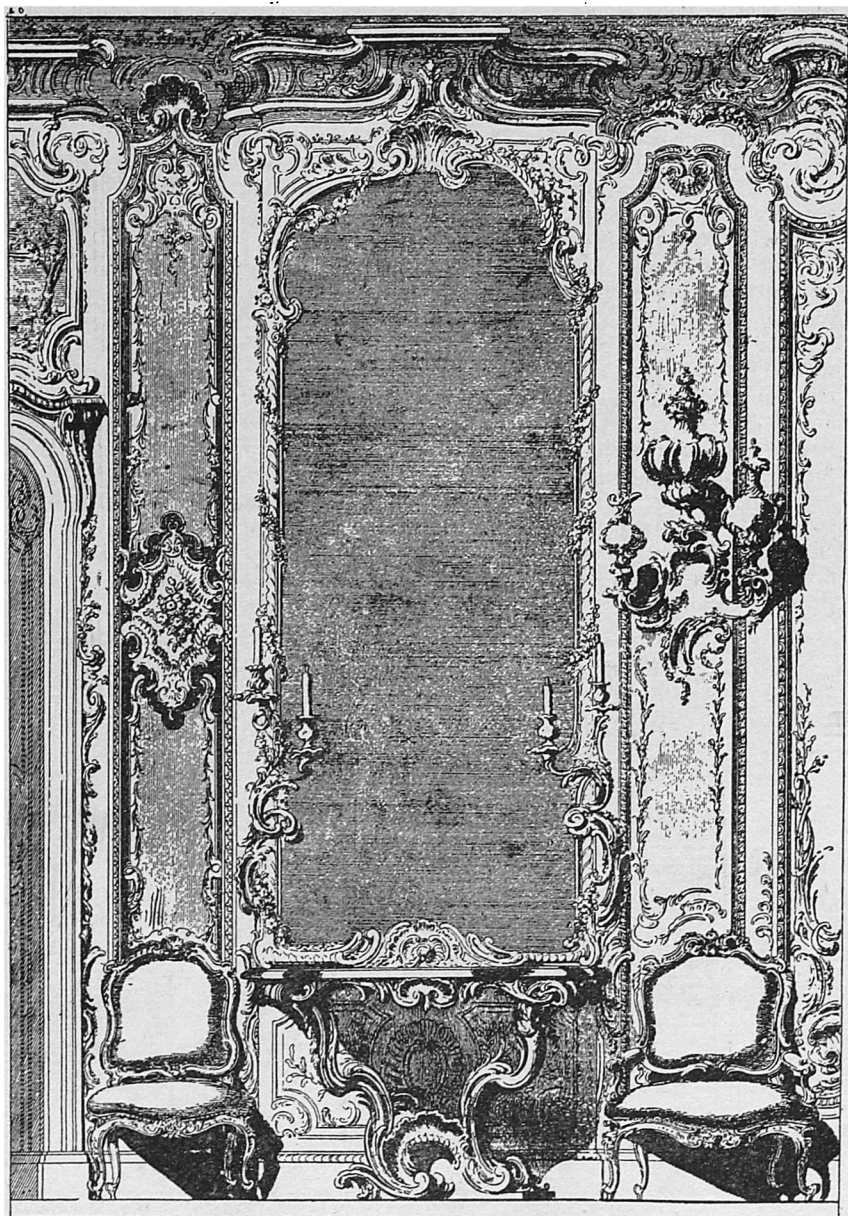


CABINET, STYLE GERMAN RENAISSANCE.

Dutch). The French styles are commonly known as Renaissance, Louis XIII., Louis XIV., Louis XV., Louis XVI. and Empire. The Italian, German, and Flemish styles are classified by centuries. The French Renaissance style dates from Charles VIII., and the French expedition into Italy; its tendency is to return towards the pure art of antiquity, and its greatest masters are Philibert Delorme, the architect of the Tuileries, and Androuet du Cerceau. The Louis XIII. style dates from the first quarter of the seventeenth century; the dominating influence in it is that of the Flemish school, due to the sojourn of Rubens in France, and the characteristics are heaviness of form and weakness of line. The Louis XIV. style is the first purely French style created independently of all foreign influence whether Italian or Flemish; the great masters in this transformation of the art of ornamentation were Charmeton, Bérain, and Jean Le Pautre. The Louis XV. style corresponded to a social development in the direction of frivolity and elegance; its characteristics are the abandonment of straight lines and symmetry in favor of curves and capricious contours; the masters of the good Louis XV. style, the style of the Regency, are Oppenort and Meissonnier; the degeneration of the Louis XV. style is called *rocaille*. The Louis XVI. style is once more a reaction against preceding exaggerations and a return to classical art, and especially to a preference for the characteristics of the works of art then recently discovered at Pompeii and Herculaneum, that is to say for the straight lines and regular forms of Greek art. The Louis XVI. style was, however, never a servile imitation; it was a thoroughly French creation inspired by the art of the past. The servile imitation of the models offered by antiquity was received for the artists of the Republic and the Empire when the French school declined altogether, and since when no great and original transformation has taken place in the art of ornament and decoration.

It will be remarked that each of the French styles above mentioned came into existence—thanks to a concurrence of circumstances of the order already specified in our theory of style and of the nature of the artist. An examination of the Italian, Dutch, and German styles would lead us to similar conclusions, just as analysis of the furniture and ornamentation of the present day, even supposing there be no documents and no evidence but the objects themselves, will clearly show to the historian of the future the restless, paltry Brummagem character of the nineteenth century interior, the fickleness and vacillation of our taste, and at the same time the inexhaustibility of our curiosity and research.

THE staircase we think should always be carpeted, at least with a narrow carpet running down the center, even if the stairs be of handsome wood, wax polished. The unyielding surface of the wood is very trying to the feet.



PIER GLASS AND CHAIRS, STYLE LOUIS XV.